

*The following opinion, written by Judy Lackritz, appeared in the San Antonio Express-News on August 26, 2012 at [www.mysanantonio.com/opinion/commentary/article/Renew-amendment-to-help-religious-refugees-3813539.php](http://www.mysanantonio.com/opinion/commentary/article/Renew-amendment-to-help-religious-refugees-3813539.php)*

In San Antonio, I coordinate a program that provides dinners for wounded military personnel and their families. Last year, I met a volunteer at one of the dinners, Eva Balcazar. I learned that Eva is a survivor who left Berlin with her parents after Kristallnacht. They were granted visas to live in Ecuador, and her family was assisted there by the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society. Eva, however, did not know HIAS still existed.

Today, HIAS provides rescue and refuge for persecuted and oppressed refugees and immigrants of all backgrounds. My particular emphasis with HIAS has been to work on the Lautenberg Amendment, which expires Sept. 30.

The amendment was enacted to help establish a presumption of eligibility for refugee status, primarily for Jews and evangelical Christians in the former Soviet Union, who were seeking to permanently immigrate to the United States. In 2004, the amendment was expanded to include religious minorities in Iran.

Today, most refugees who enter the United States under the Lautenberg Amendment come

from Iran. Because the United States does not have an embassy in Iran, an agreement was established between the State Department and the Austrian government to allow religious minorities to be eligible to receive visas to leave Iran. They go to Vienna and wait in safety while the United States government processes their applications for refugee resettlement.

One religious group whose members have benefited from the Lautenberg Amendment is the Mandeans, 550 of whom reside in San Antonio. That's the largest number of Mandeans anywhere in the United States. Mandeans are followers of John the Baptist. They are neither Jews nor Christians, but fall chronologically somewhere in between.

The Mandeans have been in Iran for 2,000 years, but in recent years, have been subjected to high levels of religious repression. Members of the San Antonio Mandeans have told me their children are forced to study Islam in Iranian schools. They cannot work in food service industries because they are considered unclean, nor can they work in other professions, such as the government, because they are not Muslim.

To the Mandeans in our community, along with Christians, Baha'is, Jews and other religious minorities, the Lautenberg Amendment is a critical lifeline to religious freedom. While in Washington, I had the chance to visit with congressional staff on Capitol Hill, and what I observed was that awareness of religious freedom issues appears to be rising in the United States.

Each year since 1999, the secretary of state has designated Iran as a “Country of Particular Concern” under the International Religious Freedom Act. According to the 2012 annual report of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom:

“The government of Iran continues to engage in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, including prolonged detention, torture, and executions based primarily or entirely upon the religion of the accused. Iran is a constitutional, theocratic republic that discriminates against its citizens on the basis of religion or belief. During the past year, religious freedom conditions continued to deteriorate, especially for religious minorities, most notably Baha'is, as well as Christians and Sufi Muslims.”

To be able to advocate for these religious minorities while in Washington has been a special honor. With a renewed understanding of how HIAS' work affects individuals in communities across our nation, I know that we must all work together to encourage the U.S. government to support the promise of religious freedom, not just at home, but also abroad. We must help our country to live up to its legacy as a safe haven for those in need. Encourage your representatives and senators to vote yes to renew the Lautenberg Amendment.

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